



# Discovery of Spitsbergen by Willem Barents - June 17, 1596

**Vasanth**

Editorial team

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## General Note

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Willem Barents, the Dutch navigator was born on the island of Terschelling off the Friesland coast of the Netherlands. He searched for a northeast passage from Europe to Asia and for whom the Barents Sea was named. Because of his extensive voyages, accurate charting, and the valuable meteorological data he collected, he is regarded as one of the most important early Arctic explorers. Barents took part in two unsuccessful Arctic voyages before his memorable discovery. Barents and Heemskerck rounded the northernmost point, naming it Hook of Desire, and sailed eastward, at first believing, from the open water encountered, that they had discovered the Northeast Passage.

Spitsbergen was 'officially' discovered by the Dutchman Willem Barentsz in 1596. The discovery of Spitsbergen was made public and very soon attracted the attention of Dutch and English entrepreneurs. Their main interest was the reported abundance of Greenland Right whales (also called Bowhead whales). Soon after Barentsz' famous journey, the first phase of whaling started in Spitsbergen's nearshore waters. Spitsbergen or the archipelago of Svalbard has a long and interesting history of many chapters, which partly overlap in time, partly follow upon each other with a rather quiet phase in between, but are often not related of each other. During this expedition he died on Novaya Zemlya in 1597.

In England, Spitsbergen was often called Greenland in the 17th and 18th centuries, due to the supposition that Spitsbergen and the real Greenland were linked somewhere in the north. In the 19th century, explorers and scientists discovered Spitsbergen as an interesting playground. Until the First World War, Spitsbergen was no man's land, but in 1920, a treaty was signed in Paris which put Spitsbergen under Norwegian administration and sovereignty, but guaranteed free access for citizens of all signatory nations as well as demilitarisation. The Spitsbergen Treaty came into force in 1925 and remains valid. The Second World War was an important and dramatic milestone for all activities in Spitsbergen. In recent years, science has increased and is done by a number of nations, and so has tourism and service industries, whereas mining is slowly losing importance. But there is still space for adventure and trappers.